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TUESDAY HIGHLIGHTS

- Chairman of Special Committee against Apartheid welcomes announced initiatives by South African President in Parliament; calls them "a step forward" in process of fundamental change in the country.

- United Nations humanitarian agencies warn that thousands of refugees in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia, Mozambique and Malawi will die due to drought, civil war and concentration of funding for Gulf conflict; UNICEF to appeal on Friday for $130 million from international community to avert crisis.

- Human Rights Commission hears address by Swedish Foreign Minister on question of human rights violations in occupied Arab territories.

- Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for framework convention on climate change opens at Westfields Conference Center, Washington, D.C.

- UNICEF Executive Director reports on "momentous" developments for children as Executive Board opens organizational session.

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The Chairman of the Special Committee against Apartheid, Ibrahim Gambari (Nigeria), said today in a statement to the press that he welcomed South African President de Klerk's announcement in Parliament last Friday on apartheid. He said it "undoubtedly" represented "a step forward" in the continuing process of bringing about fundamental change in South Africa. The repeal of the Land and Group Areas Acts, and the promise to introduce interim changes to the Population Registration Act, would remove pillars of apartheid, he said.

Mr. Gambari expressed hope that the initiatives were accompanied by substantive policies, regarding access to land by the black majority as well as by programmes of affirmative action, which, he said, were necessary to redress the grave socio-economic inequities generated by those Acts in education, housing, health and employment.

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The Committee Chairman further acknowledged the acceptance of the South African authorities to hold a multi-party conference and to consider transitional arrangements at all levels of Government. He said such a conference could be an auspicious step if it led to an agreement by all parties concerned on the mechanisms for the drawing up of a new constitution as envisaged in the United Nations Declaration on Apartheid and its Destructive Consequences in Southern Africa.

However, Mr. Gambari said, the South African President's silence on a number of issues that were crucial to the creation of an appropriate atmosphere for negotiations remained a source of serious concern. The speech, he said, made no reference to the promised review of the Internal Security Act and the implementation of other agreements made with the African National Congress (ANC), in particular concerning the release of political prisoners and the return of political exiles without restrictions.

Finally, Mr. Gambari said, the right of all South Africans to vote and be voted for was still to be realized under the new dispensation of President de Klerk, as had been pointed out by the leaders of the black majority.

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While international attention is focused on the Persian Gulf region and on the exodus of refugees from Iraq and Kuwait, the situation of refugees in Africa remains a major concern for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

In a press release issued at Headquarters, UNHCR said continued conflicts and instability in a number of African countries had created new refugee movements. In addition, sustained increases in fuel prices as a result of events in the Gulf had had a major negative impact on the budgeting of UNHCR assistance programmes throughout the continent.

Outlining the current situation of refugees in a number of African countries, UNHCR said that with regard to refugees in Ethiopia, the Sudanese refugee population in the country currently stood at around 385,000. A possible new influx of 50,000 Sudanese refugees was expected because of continuing conflict, drought and famine and UNHCR had prepared a contingency plan. In addition, the agency said, more that 375,000 Somali refugees were currently to be found in Ethiopia together with more than 12,000 new Ethiopian returnees from Somalia.

With respect to the Sudan, UNHCR reported that economic and environmental problems, coupled with continued conflict between government and rebel forces, had produced extensive crop failures. Food prices had reached levels which were beyond the purchasing power of many of the estimated 700,000 Ethiopian refugees living in the Sudan.

In November last year, UNHCR went on, the Mozambican refugee population in Malawi stood at nearly 910,000. A new influx of Mozambicans in late 1990 led to overcrowding in a number of camps, thus increasing the potential for

outbreaks of disease. The agency was reassessing its programme in Malawi in order to respond to those problems. Current peace talks between the Mozambican Government and the Mozambique National Resistence Movement (RENAMO) could improve the prospect for the organized return of the refugee population in Malawi and other neighbouring countries.

With regard to Liberian refugees, UNHCR said that since the beginning of the civil war, which started on the last day of 1989, more than 700,000 Liberians -- 32 per cent of the population -- had sought asylum in the neighbouring countries of Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. The conclusion of a cease-fire agreement in Bamako at the end of November, coupled with the United Nations distribution of foodstuffs within the country, had led to a reduction in the pace of the exodus, the agency said.

In a related development, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) warned today that thousands of people will die in Africa unless the international community helps to avert a crisis as potentially tragic as that of 1985.

The Director of UNICEF's Emergency Programme, Charles La Muniere, told a news conference in Geneva today that the situation was particularly critical in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia, Somalia, Mozambique and Malawi. The agency would appeal on Friday for $130 million, Mr. La Muniere said, to meet the non-food needs of women and children in those countries this year.

The critical situation was due to a combination of drought, civil war, increased oil prices, lower commodity prices and the concentration of funding for the Gulf, Mr. La Muniere said, adding that some 100,000 people's lives were at risk.

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The Commission on Human Rights, currently discussing the question of human rights violations in the occupied territories, among other things, heard yesterday a statement by Foreign Minister Sten Andersson of Sweden.

Commenting on the human rights situation in the Middle East, Mr. Andersson said the Commission had listened for many years to reports of serious human rights violations in Iraq.

Iraq had broken the peace with its brutal invasion of Kuwait and reports emanating from there told of "inconceivable atrocities", the Swedish Foreign Minister said. The missile attacks on civilians in non-participating countries, deliberate oil spills and the threat of bio-chemical and chemical weapons were further examples of Iraq's disrespect for international humanitarian law, he said.

Mr. Andersson went on to say that Sweden condemned infringements in the Baltic republics on basic human rights by a Government which claimed to adhere to international laws and instruments, the most recent of which was the Paris Charter signed last year.

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The Human Rights Commission is currently in the second week of its forty-seventh session in Geneva, which ends on 8 March.

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The urgency of addressing the issue of global warming was stressed yesterday as the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for a framework convention on climate change opened at the Westfields International Conference Center, outside Washington, D.C. The negotiations are expected to produce an international agreement on ways to reduce global climate warming.

Opening the meeting on behalf of Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar, Antoine Blanca, Director-General for Development and International Economic Co-operation, said interdependence had acquired a new dimension, that of climate change. Harmony among nations and between nations and this planet, he said, was a necessary condition for the successful elaboration of a framework convention.

Representing the host country -- the United States -- Michael R. Deland, Chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Quality, said it was the height of irony that as this dialogue on a shared environmental future was beginning, Saddam Hussein's premeditated release of crude oil into the Persian Gulf was inflicting enormous environmental damage.

As to the negotiations, he said the agreements reached should be long-term and adaptable. There was need for an international climate convention that committed all nations to meaningful action, yet did not limit States to some fixed formula.

Also addressing the opening meeting, Mostafa K. Tolba, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), said the mounting evidence of global warming and climate change gave urgency to the Committee's negotiations. What was needed was a convention which stipulated what must be done, by whom, when, how and at what cost.

G.O.P. Obasi, Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), said the negotiations on a framework convention on climate change would also be about fundamental global changes in energy policy and practices, the use of the world's forests, low-cost transfer of energy-efficient technologies to developing countries and funding development pathways with low greenhouse gas emissions.

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James P. Grant, UNICEF Executive Director, told the Fund's Executive Board this morning that the past year had been "probably the most momentous year for children in history". Mr. Grant addressed the Board as it opened an organizational session in preparation for its regular session scheduled for 27 April - 3 May.

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The Executive Director outlined steps being taken by UNICEF to address crisis situations in the Sudan, Ethiopia and Angola and reviewed such challenges as the spread of the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and the effects of the Gulf crisis. In particular, he said that both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the World Summit for Children Declaration called for the protection of children caught in conflict situations, and discussions were currently under way on how to honour those provisions.

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